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ABSTRACT

This digest examines the definitions of outdoor, experiential, and environmental education and clarifies the boundaries and essential elements of each tradition. Early in its history, outdoor education was influenced by advocates of camping education and nature study. Today outdoor education includes outdoor experiences designed to meet objectives in many areas and has emerged as a context for learning. Experiential education was embraced by outdoor and adventure educators as a method of using real-life experiences to achieve learning goals. Definitions have progressed from "learning by doing" to more constructivist notions of learning through carefully chosen experiences supported by reflection and critical analysis. While tracing its lineage, in part, to outdoor education, environmental education began to take concrete form in the late 1960s with the first Earth Day and publication of the first journal of environmental education. The basic aim of environmental education is to develop environmentally literate citizens with the core concepts and skills needed to take responsible action with regard to the natural environment. Educational practices commonly draw from combinations of outdoor, experiential, and environmental education. Examples of combined approaches are given. (Contains 16 references.) (SV)

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Outdoor, Experiential, and Environmental Education: Converging or Diverging Approaches?

Carol Adkins and Bora Simmons

For many educators, the terms *outdoor, experiential,* and *environmental education* are perceived as interchangeable. Is this perception true? Are these different approaches to education or have they converged over time? All three fields can trace their roots, at least in part, to the educational philosophy and methods of John Dewey (1938). This Digest begins with a discussion of definitions drawn from dozens that have been developed and critiqued in the literature of each field. The purpose here is to clarify the boundaries and essential elements of each tradition and to consider whether they are converging, diverging, or mutually supportive fields of education.

The Digest concludes with examples of combining the approaches to conduct lessons in a variety of content areas.

Defining Outdoor Education

Outdoor education has been defined in a variety of ways throughout its history. Those who influenced the field early on defined outdoor education with the needs of camping education in mind. For example, L. B. Sharp (1943), one of the earliest advocates of camping education, offered the following rationale for outdoor education: "That which can best be taught inside the schoolrooms should there be taught, and that which can best be learned through experience dealing directly with native materials and life situations outside the school should there be learned" (p. 363). As the field of outdoor education matured, organizations emerged that worked to gain support from school personnel. For example, Julian W. Smith began the National Outdoor Education Project in 1955. Smith elucidated the connection between outdoor education and the school curriculum in his definition: "Outdoor education means learning *in* and *for* the outdoors. It is a means of curriculum extension and enrichment through outdoor experiences" (Hammerman, 1980, p. 33).

Over time, definitions of outdoor education became more general to accommodate a wide variety of programs. Donaldson and Donaldson (1958) defined outdoor education as "education in, about, and for the out of doors" (p. 63). According to Priest (1986), outdoor education is "an experiential process of learning by doing, which takes place primarily through exposure to the out-of-doors" (p. 13), and Hammerman, Hammerman, and Hammerman (2001) have simply stated that outdoor education is "education which takes place in the outdoors" (p. 5).

Originally, outdoor education was used mostly for nature study. Today, it includes outdoor experiences designed to meet objectives in many areas (Richardson & Simmons, 1996). For example, a teacher could take students outside to measure objects on the schoolyard for a mathematics lesson, or to a fire station to study an aspect of the local community. As these examples show, outdoor education appears to have emerged as a *context* for learning.

Defining Experiential Education

The notion of experiential education, or learning by doing, has a long history. Early on, outdoor educators embraced experiential education as a way of learning in the outdoors. Similarly, adventure education programs, which also take participants into the outdoors, use real-world experiences to achieve their learning goals. It was not until the 1970s that experiential education emerged as a recognized field of education, and in 1977 the Association for Experiential Education (AEE) was established (Hammerman, Hammerman, & Hammerman, 2001).

Professionals in the field have offered a progression of definitions for experiential education. Ford (1986) called it "learning by doing or experience," and suggested that "outdoor education may be viewed as experiential, especially when the learning takes place through experiences" (p. 1). The 1994 AEE definition expanded the understanding: "Experiential education is a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experiences" (AEE, 2002, p. 5). This definition is followed by 12 principles, including these three related to learning:

- Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis.
- The results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning.
- Opportunities are nurtured for learners and educators to explore and examine their own values (AEE, 2002, p. 5).

The AEE definition embraces constructivist learning theory as well as the traditional practice of learning by doing. Itin (1999) adds that experiential education requires "the learner to take initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results" (p. 93). Taken together these definitions suggest that experiential education is a *process* or *method* that can be used to teach. This process can take place in any location and does not require the learner to be outdoors as in the definition of outdoor education.

Defining Environmental Education

If outdoor education focuses primarily on where educational activities take place and experiential education focuses primarily on the process involved, what characterizes environmental education? Like the former two concepts, the definition of environmental education has also evolved.

Although environmental education can trace its lineage, at least partly, to outdoor education, it is considered a distinct field (Disinger, 2001). It began to take concrete form with the publication of the *Journal of Environmental Education* in 1969, celebration of the first Earth Day in 1970, and passage of the National Environmental Education Act in 1970. For many educators, however, environmental education begins with two founding documents: The Belgrade Charter (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization-United Nations Environment Programme [UNESCO-UNEP], 1976) and the Tbilisi Declaration (UNESCO-UNEP, 1978). The Belgrade Charter provides a widely accepted goal statement:

> The goal of environmental education is to develop a world population that is aware of, and concerned about, the environment and its associated problems, and which has the knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivations, and commitment to work individually and collectively toward solutions of current problems and the prevention of new ones. (p. 2)

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A few years later, the world's first intergovernmental conference on environmental education adopted the Tbilisi Declaration. This declaration, built on the Belgrade Charter, suggests that the basic aim of environmental education is to help

> individuals and communities understand the complex nature of the natural and the built environments resulting from the interaction of their biological, physical, social, economic, and cultural aspects, and acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, and practical skills to participate in a responsible and effective way in anticipating and solving environmental problems, and in the management of the quality of the environment. (UNESCO-UNEP, 1978, p. 92)

From these two statements, Hungerford, Peyton, and Wilke (1980) proposed the superordinate goal of environmental education:

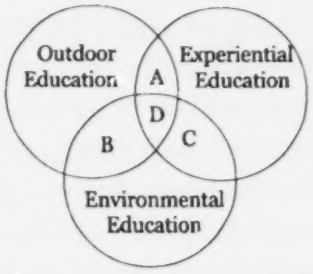
> to aid citizens in becoming environmentally knowledgeable and, above all, skilled and dedicated citizens who are willing to work, individually and collectively, toward achieving and/or maintaining a dynamic equilibrium between quality of life and quality of the environment. (p. 44)

As environmental education evolved, its definitions have been researched, critiqued, revisited, and expanded. Perhaps what distinguishes environmental education from outdoor and experiential education is its focus on developing the *core concepts* and *skills* that environmentally literate citizens need for responsible action. Only through a comprehensive, cohesive K-12 program can the ultimate goal, environmental literacy, be achieved (North American Association for Environmental Education, 1999).

Converging, Diverging, or Mutually Supportive?

The preceding explanations show that, while each field has its own focus and purpose, the fields share related purposes and foci. Outdoor education is a direct antecedent of environmental education but can include other subject matter than learning about the environment. Experiential education often employs outdoor settings but can take place anywhere individuals learn by doing. Environmental education can take place outdoors using experiential approaches or indoors using a standard textbook.

Sorting out these definitions and putting them into action is no easy task. The accompanying diagram illustrates the relationships among these fields.



Although it is easy to draw sharp lines among the fields in a diagram, the lines often blur in practice. Examples of combined approaches include

(A) An outdoor/experiential education lesson in which learners, with the aid of compasses, "draw" geometric figures by walking the lines in an open field.

(B) An outdoor/environmental education lesson in which learners participate in a simulation of predator/prey relationships.*

(C) An experiential/environmental education lesson in which learners test the pH of aquarium water in their classroom.

One can easily consider educational purposes that build from the strengths of all three approaches (D). Take, for example, a group of learners studying their local stream. As they progress through their investigations, they might visit the stream on multiple occasions, collecting water samples to determine water quality, interviewing residents along the stream, and taking stream flow and temperature measurements. Many of their lessons take place outdoors. The participants are learning by doing: collecting, interviewing, and measuring. Finally, they are investigating their environment, learning about biophysical, social, and economic systems. As their investigations progress, they develop the understandings and skills necessary to make informed decisions regarding the environment.

Strong and lasting lessons take shape when at least two of these practices are combined, but especially when outdoor, experiential, and environmental education are combined to support one another.

* Simulations are seen here as an *abstraction* of the real world. Simulations "edit out elements of direct experiences." They provide "rules for how the model behaves or models interact" (Engleson & Yockers, 1994, p. 119). Consequently, simulations may not provide the real-world learning-by-doing experiences of experiential education.

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